

**“Orientalism” Dossier**

## Against a besieged literature: fictions, obsessions and globalisations of Chinese literature\*

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**Abstract**

Chinese literature in the 20th century has seen how the combination between, on one hand, the canon established by Socialist realism in China and, on the other, the approaches of Area Studies in the West imposed a limited vision and a partial and slanted assessment of its complexity. The article argues that it is essential to recover the literariness of the literary text, appealing to the sophistication and critical capacity of readers, as a basic strategy for liberating Chinese literature from the interpretive siege that constrains it. The article analyses the interrelation of various aspects –such as the confusion between reality and fiction, the obsessions for interpretations of a national allegorical nature or other mechanisms of globalisation and self-Orientalism– that, in an interrelated way, determine the production and circulation of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in the global literary system. The novel *Fortress Besieged* by the writer Qian Zhongshu is a paradigmatic example of this situation.

**Keywords**

Chinese literature, globalisation, Orientalism, self-Orientalism, Qian Zhongshu

**Resum**

La literatura xinesa del segle xx ha vist com la combinació entre, d'una banda, el cànon marcat pel realisme socialista a la Xina i, de l'altra, les aproximacions pròpies dels Estudis d'Àrea a Occident imposava una mirada limitada i una valoració parcial i esbiaixada de la seva complexitat. L'article defensa que és imprescindible recuperar la literarietat del text literari, apel·lant a la sofisticació i a la capacitat crítica dels lectors, com una estratègia fonamental per a alliberar la literatura xinesa del setge interpretatiu que la constreny. L'article analitza la interrelació de diversos aspectes –com ara la confusió entre realitat i ficció, les obsessions per les interpretacions en clau al·legòrica nacional o altres mecanismes de globalització i auto-orientalisme– que, de manera interrelacionada, determinen la

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producció i la circulació de la literatura xinesa moderna i contemporània dins del sistema literari global. La novel·la *La fortalesa assetjada* de l'escriptor Qian Zhongshu és un exemple paradigmàtic d'aquesta situació.

### Paraules clau

literatura xinesa, globalització, orientalisme, auto-orientalisme, Qian Zhongshu

It is common for some literary genres, such as the historical novel, to purposely roam an ethereal figurative frontier, a line that fades away in the hands of readers who agree –consciously– to enter into an interplay of correspondences blurred, to a greater or lesser extent, between reality and fiction. Up to a certain point, therefore, it does not seem necessary to remind ourselves of that which seems obvious when we read works such as *The Name of the Rose* or *Perfume*: the distinction between history and literature. However, when we confront geographically distant works of literature, the obviousness is no longer so, and the reminder becomes, perhaps, pertinent and necessary. It is also common that, in this new context, we forget –unconsciously– about the fictionality of the literary work and we read any text coming from, for example China, Japan or Korea, whether it be realist or modernist, traditional or avant-garde, romantic or science fiction, almost as an essay that reflects in a frank, transparent and non-problematic way the “society”, “history” or “culture” of a given country.

To a certain extent, then, we can observe that the acuteness that makes us aware of the interplay between reality and fiction concealed behind a literary work is usually proportional to the distance that separates us from the culture of the work in question. When, as readers, we decide to begin a novel by a foreign author with the intention of learning about a reality that is remote and unknown to us, we are guided by a noble, but at the same time dangerous, curiosity. The impatience to draw closer to the Other often causes to dare to thoughtlessly extrapolate from a piece of literary fiction a whole series of facts and conditions (historical, social, political, cultural) about a context that is unknown to us. Thus, we forget an essential condition of the novel: whatever its appearance may be, it is no more than a literary artefact. Although it is true that each novel is set in a specific historical context and, therefore, maintains an inevitable tie with the society and culture within which it was created, it is also true that, as a novel, it presents us with a representation –more or less accurate, more or less slanted, more or less plausible– with all the problems

inherent therein and sufficiently studied ever since the beginning of poststructuralism.<sup>1</sup>

Any teacher of non-Western literatures repeatedly meets readers perfectly capable of producing sophisticated interpretations of works that are close to them but that, when it is a question of confronting texts that are culturally distant, they turn into naive readers who forget the complexity of the literary act and blend reality with fiction, literature with history. Unfortunately, however, this is not an attitude limited to the student or amateur reader; rather, it is shared in the academic sphere and in the field of criticism. Modern and contemporary Chinese literature<sup>2</sup> is a paradigmatic example. Victim of unsophisticated interpretations and of the sole perspective provided by Area Studies,<sup>3</sup> Chinese literature has been seen from the West as a cultural mirror, historical document or sociological fieldwork that provides us with clear, unquestionable truths about an objectivable China. Consequently, Chinese literature has had difficulties in being treated on an equal footing –as literature in its breadth and complexity– in the global literary system.

In the Chinese case, two differentiated, but mutually sustaining, fronts have contributed to the siege of the literariness of the literary work. On the one hand, the restrictive Western view that we have just commented on, related to Area Studies and with a long historical trajectory that –as has already been denounced by Edward Said (1978)– starts with colonial Orientalism, intensifies during the second half of the 20th century, as a result of the particular dynamics of the Cold War, and can be seen to continue in the parameters of today's global capitalism. On the other hand, the Chinese conception of literature itself: if literature in China has been seen, from the beginning, as a moral or educational tool, literary instrumentalism reached its greatest expression during the middle of the last century. At Yan'an Forum in 1942, Mao Zedong (毛泽东) declared that art and literature had to remain at the service of the masses and that, therefore, writers had to write for workers, peasants and soldiers –nothing could be further from the “art for art's sake” with its Kantian roots that has dominated most modern

1. See the introduction to this dossier which summarily sets out the main contributions of poststructuralism in the field of the humanities and social sciences since the 1970s.

2. In this article, I have used the characteristic periods for Chinese literary history, whereby “modern” (现代 *xiandai*) relates to the literature produced from the 1920s onwards (the specific year varies depending on the historian in question) and “contemporary” (当代 *dangdai*) refers to literature dating from 1976 onwards, the year of the death of Mao Zedong. These periods differ greatly from those used in European literary contexts, for example.

3. See the introduction to this dossier.



artistic conceptions in the West. The subsequent imposition of this socialist realism not only marked Chinese literary development during practically the entire second half of the century, but also brought about a revision of previous literature. It is precisely this recanonicalisation that has governed the exportation of Chinese works to the West in recent decades. In short, then, we can see how the convergence of these two fronts (Area Studies in the West and socialist realism in China) generated a discourse that shaped and, to a degree, continues to shape a particular way of approaching, understanding and assessing Chinese literature.

This article starts from the premise that this conception, in effect during more than half a century, offers only a partial and incomplete vision of modern and contemporary Chinese literature: not all that has been written in China during the last hundred years falls within the context of (socialist) realism, nor does everything that has been labelled as such fit with this assessment.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese literary panorama is much more complex than that which Area Studies and historiography have outlined, as demonstrated by authors, works and literary movements throughout the 20th century. Regarding this, the article presents the following thesis: it is essential to recover the literariness of the literary text, appealing to the sophistication and critical capacity of the reader, as a basic strategy for liberating Chinese literature from the siege that constrains it. We will proceed to briefly examine three of the aspects that constitute this siege and that limit the perception of the complexity and plurality of 20th century Chinese literature.

## Fictions and realities

In *Witness Against History*, Yomi Braester (2003) has shown that the approach to Chinese literature by Area Studies does not take into account the literariness of literary works, nor the contradictions and complexities inherent in them. Literature is fiction and must be read as such. Braester's contribution to the field of modern Chinese literature comes at a moment in which, as of a relatively short time ago, scholars such as Leo Lee, Ted Hutters, David Wang or Shu-mei Shih have been attempting to place in doubt, by means of different strategies, the premises that have governed the comprehension, assessment and circulation of modern Chinese literature both in China and the West. Hutters (2005) and Wang (1997) have chosen to do so by questioning the date of the beginning of Chinese literary modernity. Instead of adopting the dates that have been considered canonical (around

the May Fourth Movement of 1919), they date this beginning in the last decades of the 19th century. This exercise does not involve a simple chronological precision, rather it is transcendent because it recovers works and authors from a period of great cultural and literary effervescence that the previous historiography –dominated by the socialist theses that situated the genesis of modernity in the authors of May Fourth– had thought little of and condemned to obscurity. In turn, Lee (1999) and Shih (2001) have opted to question the form and content of Chinese literary modernity. Following the path opened up by Chinese academics like Yan Jiayan (严家炎), they have brought to light and given literary significance to modernist texts and authors from cosmopolitan Shanghai of the twenties and thirties, symbolised by the journal *Les contemporains* (现代 *xiandai*) that –also owing to the dominance of socialist theses– have not enjoyed critical consideration until now. Braester, on the other hand, introduces a new method, questioning that which had always been considered Chinese literary modernity “from the inside”: by means of critical re-readings of modern works, he deconstructs the meanings that they were traditionally given and shows the complex relation between history, testimony and representation, which have dominated Chinese literary modernity. Beyond the specific value of Braester's contribution to the discipline, his work is of interest because it demands a critical, sophisticated and open-minded interpretation, which avoids pre-existing paradigms and that, fundamentally, lays the problematic relationship between fiction and reality on the table.

Without going into the profound analyses of Braester, the famous preface to the first edition of the collection *Call to Arms* (呐喊) by the writer who is traditionally considered to be the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun (鲁迅; 1881-1936), provides us with two simple and illustrative examples of the confusion between history and literature.

Firstly, let's look at the so-called “slide incident”. This is a celebrated episode because it describes the key moment in which Lu Xun decided to give up his medical studies in Japan to devote himself fully to literature:

I do not know what advanced methods are now used to teach microbiology, but at that time lantern slides were used to show the microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructor might show slides of national scenery or news to fill up the time. This was during the Russo-Japanese War, so there were many war films, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one

4. Indeed, a simple way of highlighting this diversity is to take into account that not all the literature in the Chinese language comes from the People's Republic of China, but also from Taiwan, large parts of South-East Asia, such as Malaysia or Singapore, and a wide number of places around the world with speakers of the Chinese language, who, together, account for thousands of writers and hundreds of millions of readers living beyond the political borders of mainland China. Shih (2004 and 2007) coined the term *Sinophone literature* precisely to highlight and stress this literature with different characteristics and problems than those of the literature coming from the People's Republic.



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day I saw a film showing some Chinese, one of whom was bound, while many others stood around him. They were all strong fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, who was to have his head cut off by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese behind him had come to enjoy the spectacle.

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so crucial after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn't really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement. (Lu, 1923, p. 3)

As I have said, the incident has been traditionally interpreted as the triggering of Lu Xun's literary career and, consequently, as the foundation of modern Chinese literature. Thus, it has generated a great deal of analysis that has read the collected works of Lu Xun solely in terms of this biographical anecdote and, indirectly, applied it to the analysis of the whole of modern Chinese literature. Thus, it could be said that the effect that Lu Xun sought over the reader is fully successful. However, it must be taken into account that the incident has not been verified and that the famous slide has never been found. Obviously, this does not undermine the anecdote or mean that it may not be true, especially taking into account that it is a prologue written autobiographically. However, it must make us reflect on the way we handle a (literary) text and the legitimacy of extrapolating information from such.

Secondly, we need to look at how the prologue ends. Lu Xun explains that, owing to the failure of various literary and cultural projects that he had embarked on after making his decision to pursue a literary career, he became reluctant to write. Retired from public life, he kept an absolute silence. Thanks to the insistence of friends, he confesses, he decided to take up literary activity once again:

True, in spite of my own conviction, I could not blot out hope, for hope lies in the future. I could not use my own evidence to refute his assertion that it might exist. So I agreed to write, and the result was my first story, *A Madman's Diary*. From that time onwards, I could not stop writing, and would write some sort of short story from time to time at the request of friends, until I had more than a dozen of them.

(...) It is clear, then, that my short stories fall far short of being works of art; hence I count myself fortunate that

they are still known as stories, and are even being compiled in the book. Although such good fortune makes me uneasy, I am nevertheless pleased to think they have readers in the world of men, for the time being at least. (Lu, 1923, p. 56)

Traditionally, critics have interpreted this fragment –and the decision it describes– as an example of the writer's social commitment, an attitude that set the guidelines that modern Chinese literature would follow. However, there is no need to look too closely at the author's life to see the apparent contradiction between modesty, benevolence and docility transmitted by these paragraphs and the iconoclastic, temperamental and difficult character of Lu Xun. Studies such as that by Michel Hockx (2003), for example, help us to understand that this type of modest representation was usual at that time. It is, simply, a series of literary and social conventions and protocols –in the style of the *captatio benevolentiae*– inherent in the act of writing and publishing during the early decades of the 20th century in China. Again, we find an example in which an interpretation excessively focused on searching for historical evidence that does not take into account the nature and conventions of the (literary) text is dangerous, as it can lead to clues that end up being false.

## Obsessions and Orwellisations

The desire to offer social, cultural and, in particular, political information has marked a large part of the translations of Chinese literature into Western languages that have been published in recent decades. Critics such as Henry Zhao have lamented this situation:

There have been a number of compilations of contemporary Chinese writings. Regrettably, most scholars of contemporary Chinese literature still regard the work of Chinese writers as interesting chiefly for their sociological or political content. The very titles of these books (*Mao's Harvest*, *Stubborn Weeds*, *Seeds of Fire*, amongst others) reveal the underlying intention of the selections. (Zhao, 1993, p.17)<sup>5</sup>

Zhao criticises that works by Chinese literary authors are read chiefly from this sociological-political perspective (the interest of which, it must be said, he does not deny at any time), without taking into account their artistic qualities. When these novels or stories are scrutinised from a political perspective (understood here in a very limited sense as the tension between writer and party/government and not in a broad sense as the relation between any artistic manifestation and the historical context in which it is

5. Goldblatt (1995) has produced another collection more recently, with a striking title: *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused*.





unavoidably interwoven), we put aside the rhetorical and poetic devices that characterise them and that, fundamentally, make them literary.

From a theoretical point of view, reflections on the concept of national allegory –especially those of key figures such as C. T. Hsia or Fredric Jameson– have catalysed this politicising vision. In his famous *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, Hsia (1961) criticised the alleged “obsession with China” suffered by Chinese writers that limited their creativity. From a quite different paradigm, Jameson (1986) defended a similar and controversial thesis: the literatures of the Third World are necessarily allegorical given the socioeconomic context in which they are immersed. In relation to these types of theorisations based on allegory, Shu-mei Shih observed that:

Allegory is only one kind of meaning-producing form, and it is also but one of the hermeneutical codes we can bring to the reading of texts. Clever readers can [...] interpret any text as an allegory, as long as they labor to do so. (Shih, 2004, p. 21)

It is plausible, therefore, to think the “obsession with China” and the obstinacy to make political interpretations based on the nation may end up being more of a pathology of critics and readers who, consciously or unconsciously, come to a text with a predetermined hermeneutic intention, than of Chinese literature itself. Notwithstanding, it is significant that, despite the fragility of the thesis of Hsia and Jameson, the impact of their approaches has been considerable both in the academic field and in the popular imagery.

Alongside this problem of interpreting the literary object, it is also worthwhile to remark on a reflection made by Milan Kundera on what he calls the *Orwellisation* of literature. For Kundera, literature cannot be turned into a solely political surface, in the style of the novel *1984* by Orwell: “The pernicious influence of Orwell’s novel resides in its implacable reduction of a reality to its political dimension alone, and in its reduction of that dimension to what is exemplarily negative about it” (Kundera, 1996, p. 225). Literature must maintain strictly literary values, such as those that appear in the works of Kafka. The stories by the Czech author, he tells us, include “windows” that allow escape from the grey and sordid reality that surrounds the characters. In *The Trial*, for example, there is “poetry” thanks to a series of grotesque and

ironic anecdotes, which the author inserts in the middle of the most anti-poetic moments that the character has to go through. In the most difficult moments, these ways of escape grant a small dose of individual freedom and, in this way, literature exercises a liberating role. In 1984, on the other hand, there are neither windows nor ways of escape and, therefore, the result is a kind of a treatise on thought disguised as a novel. For Kundera, then, to *Orwellise* literature by reducing it to a merely political role, and to the negative aspects of politics, means turning it into victim of a totalisation that, in cases such as *1984*, is precisely that which the *Orwellised* work means to criticise.<sup>6</sup>

In the field of Chinese literature, the *Orwellisation* of literary works (which perhaps, based on what we will go into detail on in the next section, should be called *Wildswanisation*)<sup>7</sup> has dominated literary production and, above all, has monopolised interpretation. This interpretative template has even been applied to works and authors that explicitly shun political totalisation and the resulting reductionism. The most paradigmatic case is probably that of Gao Xingjian (高行健; 1940-). Following his being awarded the Nobel Prize in the year 2000, the main points of reference with which critics and the media guided the Western reader to approach Gao’s works revolved around his being a dissident who had been forced to flee from China for political reasons.<sup>8</sup> Essential elements for the interpretation of his work –his early works as an essayist and translator, the recovery of Western modernism, his facet as avant-garde playwright or, even, his artistic painter side– were relegated to the background. Gao himself has repeatedly flatly rejected literature as practical, political and moral utilitarianism, but this does not mean that he is not willing to publicly commit himself in “non-literary” ambits. In the piece “I am an Advocate of Cold Literature” (我主张一种冷的文学, *Wo zhuzhang yizhong leng de wenxue*), he comments:

Literature basically has nothing to do with politics but is purely a matter of the individual. It is the gratification of the intellect together with an observation, a review of experiences, reminiscences and feelings or the portrayal of a state of mind.

Due entirely to political need, it unfortunately grew fervent, and subjected to attacks or flattery, it was helplessly transformed into an instrument, a weapon or a target, until it finally lost what was inherent in literature. (Gao, 2003, p.11)

6. In close relation to that detailed here, Kundera also talks about *Kafkology* as an interpretative pattern that reduces the sense of a novel to the (supposed) biographical links between author and protagonist, which creates an idealised image of the author and a very limited interpretation of their work. “Kafkology produces and sustains its own image of Kafka, to the point where the author whom readers know by the name Kafka is no longer Kafka but the Kafkologized Kafka” (Kundera, 1996, p. 42).

7. The term comes from the popular novel by Chang (1991), which was a great success in the West and which has been influential in strengthening the traumatic narratives commented on by Shih subsequently.

8. For analysis of the Nobel Prize in general and its awarding to Gao Xingjian in particular, see Lovell (2006). The awarding of the 2006 Nobel to the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk reinforces this argument.



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For this reason he proposes the term “cold literature”:

This sort of literature that has recovered its innate character can be called cold literature to differentiate it from literature that promotes a teaching, attacks contemporary politics, is involved with changing society or gives vent to one's feelings and ambitions. This cold literature will of course not be newsworthy and will not arouse public attention. (Gao, 2003, p.12)

The paradox of the case of Gao Xingjian is indicative of the strength of the discourses that dominate the way of interpreting Chinese literature. Despite his attempts to distance himself from the obsession with China and the Orwellisation of literary works, Gao is adopting a stance that polarises the literary act and that inevitably reinforces, by opposing it, the interpretation of his works from a political, historical and biographical viewpoint.<sup>9</sup>

## Globalisation and self-Orientalism

Far from being an isolated literature or one that was closed within itself, 20th-century Chinese literature has been characterised by an important opening up to Western literatures.<sup>10</sup> At present, contemporary Chinese literature plays a full part in the dynamics that regulate the global literary system, although it occupies a marginalised position.<sup>11</sup> To believe, then, that Chinese works that have been translated were generated independently and that they provide us with a “representative” and “authentic” taste of a literature and of a culture removed from contemporary canons underestimates the capacity of the global literary market to influence the production of marginalised literatures.

With regard this, it is useful to turn to the notion of technology and its relation to intercultural recognition as put forth by Shu-mei Shih:

I would like to resituate the notion of technology [...] in the transnational terrain of cross-cultural politics of power and in the national terrain of interethnic and intercultural politics of power, so that it denotes the constellation of discourses, institutional practices, academic productions, popular media and other forms of representation that create and sanction concepts. “Technologies of recognition”, then, refers to the mechanisms in the discursive (un)conscious –with bearings on social and cultural (mis)understandings– that produce “the West” as the agent of recognition and “the rest” as the object of recognition, in representation. (Shih, 2004, p. 17)

Shih reminds us that recognition is never neutral: there is the one who recognises and the one who is recognised, and this process is governed by a discursive imbalance. Applying this reflection to the literary field helps us to think of the negotiations and imbalances inherent in the world of translation: what is translated and in which direction. Shih goes into depth on this idea, analysing two of the “technologies” (academic discourse and the literary market), which favour the recognition and circulation within the global literary system of a particular model of novel related to China:

Some of the sensational trauma narratives about China's Cultural Revolution written in English by first-generation immigrants living in the United States, Britain, and France, for instance, may be categorized as deliberate national allegorical narratives with an eye to the market, and so may the works of the much-criticized fifth-generation cinema from China, in which allegory was supposed to be the chief mode of representation. When the signified is predetermined, allegories are easier to write or create and to understand and consume. A predetermined signified is produced by consensus between the audience in the West and the Third World writer or director. It is a contractual relation of mutual benefit and favor that works first to confirm the stereotyped knowledge of the audience and second to bring financial rewards to the makers of those cultural products. (Shih, 2004, p. 21)

The collection that Shih refers to, which includes works such as the popular *Wild Swans* (Chang, 1991) could be broadened to include other works with a certain degree of commercial success, but not specifically centred on the Cultural Revolution, such as *The Good Women of China*, *Beijing Doll*, *Shanghai Baby*, *Madame Mao* or *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Although many of these novels are not even written in Chinese, they are given the qualifier of Chinese literature in the media, bookstores and in the catalogues of university libraries. A feminised national allegory is hidden –yet quite explicit on book covers that tend to combine exoticism and femininity– behind the promise of bringing the reader closer to the reality of an unknown China. All of this forms part of an Orientalist discourse that the Western reader –even before reading the novel, when they have only seen the cover– easily identifies and “recognises” and that, consequently, increase the sales of the book. This contract of mutual benefit that Shih comments on, then, complicates the dynamic of intercultural recognition. We are not dealing with a simple binomial conflict recogniser/recognised,

9. In the second chapter of Shih (2007) other paradoxes of this type are analysed, linked, for example, to the work of the artist Hung Liu (虹刘; 1948-).

10. Between 1902 and 1907, for example, the number of translations published was slightly higher than the number of original works produced (Tarumoto, 1998, p. 39).

11. For discussion of marginalisation and Chinese literature, see Prado-Fonts (2006).



agent/object. Thus, if the dominant literatures are those that have the agency to recognise or ignore, the marginal literatures do not wait for this recognition passively, but are capable of moulding themselves to facilitate it.<sup>12</sup>

At heart, the negotiation between Chinese literature and global literature is nothing more than a reflection of the tensions between the global and the local in the contemporary world. However, far from creating a new paradigm that would substitute Orientalism as a dominant discourse, the situation of Chinese literature shows us that, as highlighted by Arif Dirlik, Orientalism has not disappeared, but simply been reconfigured in relation to Said's original conception:

[...] far from being a phenomenon of the past, Orientalism, and the culturalist epistemology that nourished it, are very much alive in the present –in a reconfigured relationship between politics, culture, and history– but not necessarily where Said located them. (Dirlik, 1996, p. 99)

In other words then, it is not about the “objectifying” discourse characteristic of the colonial period, but a relational phenomenon more typical of contemporary neo-colonialism.

Indeed, the above considerations could be refuted by arguing that perhaps we are overestimating the importance of the market in relation to literature; or diluted by pointing out the fact that these types of *Wildswanised* works accounting for an important part of the volume of translations of “Chinese” literature may only have a relative importance: after all, this commercial predominance of popular literature is common around the world, and this does not exclude the considerations that may be made about “serious” literature. Regarding this, it is important to make two clarifications that, in the case of Chinese literature, qualify these possible objections.

Firstly, setting aside the fact that the distinction between popular and elitist has been rather diffuse and problematic in 20th-century Chinese literature, in the current socioeconomic situation, the impact of commercialisation has marked the functioning of the Chinese literary system in a decisive way. One of the most obvious demonstrations of this is the progressive abandoning of the short story in favour of the novel as the dominant and, to a degree, prestigious literary form. Reputed writers of today, such as Mo Yan (莫言; 1955-), Yu Hua (余华; 1960-) or Su Tong (苏童; 1963-), have chosen to devote more attention to novels since

this, among other things, facilitates exportation (and profits) in the form of translations, films or television series.

Secondly, in the case of the majority of Western literatures, recognition of the market is balanced by –or, at least, usually coexists uncomfortably with– other “technologies of recognition”, such as literary criticism or the academic world. In the case of Chinese literature, however, the recognition of *Wildswanised* works is not limited to the market but has been much more transversal and, therefore, there has not (yet) been a critical or academic counterweight, on the contrary: criticism and the academic world have also focused on these works and have reinforced the monopoly. This takes us back to the two previous points of this article and shows the circularity and strength of the siege to which modern Chinese literature is subjected.

## The siege of *Fortress Besieged*

The confusion between reality and fiction, the obsessions with China and the interpretations of a national allegorical nature or the mechanisms of globalisation or self-Orientalism that we have analysed throughout this article limit the West's perception of Chinese literature and determine its circulation in the global literary system. It should come as no surprise, then, that works by authors as important as Shen Congwen (沈从文; 1902-1988) or Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书; 1910-1998), marginalised by both socialist canons and a global literary market that has no interest in works that do not invest in trauma and the most explicit historical representation, have been overlooked, victims of this literary siege.

*Fortress Besieged* (围城 *weicheng*), by Qian Zhongshu, published in instalments in 1946 and in book form in 1947, is probably one of the clearest examples (Qian 1946).<sup>13</sup> In China, the work went practically unnoticed during decades. To the fact that it was published at a time in which the country was in the middle of civil war, we must add that, with the communist victory and the introduction of the literary directives of socialist realism, the novel was no longer to be found in bookshops and libraries and was not available until 1980 in a revised edition.<sup>14</sup> For his part, the author, Qian Zhongshu, abandoned novel writing and made something of a name for himself as an essayist and classical literature scholar, a discipline in which he took refuge like many other writers threatened by Maoism –although he was unable to avoid having problems during the Cultural Revolution. In the

12. As Shih points out above, this phenomenon has been clearly seen in the case of fifth-generation filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou (张艺谋; 1951-) or Chen Kaige (陈凯歌; 1952-), a movement symbolically starting in 1984 with the film *Yellow Earth* (黄土地 *huang tu di*), where Chen was the director and Zhang director of photography.

13. English translation: Z. Qian (1979). *Fortress Besieged*. J. Kelly and N. K. Mao (trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

14. The celebrated and (supposedly) canonical *History of Modern Chinese Literature* (中国现代文学史 *zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi*) written in the late 1970s by a large group of specialists coordinated by Tang Tao (唐弢) is an example of the way in which the novel was overlooked. *Fortress Besieged* did not appear in the first edition (1979), and was only mentioned briefly in subsequent editions.



West, the novel took decades to be recognised. Even though the US critic of Taiwanese origin, C.T. Hsia –in the midst of the Cold War and while stressing aesthetic patterns opposed to the Marxist literature of mainland China– emphasised its merits for the first time in the early 1960s in the foundational *A History of Chinese Fiction*, the level of recognition was by no means widespread.<sup>15</sup> In the academic field, the work of Qian Zhongshu has remained overshadowed by authors such as Lu Xun or Lao She, precisely because, given its nature, it is not apt for the mirror-reading carried out by Area Studies. In the commercial field, the novel has been translated into the principal Western languages, but with little publicity and sales chiefly related to university teaching.

The work, which recounts the vicissitudes of the main character, Fang Hongjian, from the time of his return to China in the middle of the War of Resistance against Japan after having spent four years in Europe studying, does not describe in an explicit way the military conflict in which the action is set. This differentiates Qian from the majority of writers who were contemporaries of his and who opted to give in to the political demands of the time and, as a prelude to the overriding socialist realism of the sixties and seventies, loaded their works with political and patriotic content. Qian's work is closer to that of other writers who managed to integrate bellicose elements in their works without losing a certain aesthetic composure –stories like “Love in a Fallen City” (倾城之恋 *qingcheng zhi lian*) or “Sealed Off” (封锁 *fengsuo*) by Zhang Ailing (张爱玲; 1920-1995) would perhaps be the most important examples. Qian decided to always keep armed conflict and the political situation as a carefully drawn backdrop: never visible but at always key to the action of the characters. This manoeuvre, carried out at a time in which writers were asked to take a political stance and in which the social, political and cultural context was sufficiently convulsed, confers extraordinary value on the novel.

If we focus our attention on formal aspects such as *datong* (打通; a juxtaposition of elements from different fields or traditions) or *chedan* (扯淡; literally “without meaning” or a manoeuvre by which the narrator of the work often closes a tense scene with a joke or an absurd phrase), which affect the narrative form and plot development of the novel, then *Fortress Besieged* can be seen to be more closely related to Kafka than to Orwell, harking back to the two poles that Kundera proposed.<sup>16</sup> Paradoxically, however, although these characteristics show the literary richness of the work, at the same time they condemn it to intra- and intercultural obscurity: this formal and literary nature represented a major obstacle for the dissemination, interpretation and valuing of *Fortress Besieged* as commented on above. The novel, however, reserves one last turn that drives home its nobility: in the way of

a prophecy, it portrays right from the first pages, the national and international alienation to which fate would subject it. Fang Hongjian, a figure halfway between China and the West, incapable of finding his own place and of communicating with either of the two sides, personifies the very novel he gave life to and even personifies a certain body of Chinese literary production: works besieged by the reductive perspective from which Chinese literature is traditionally interpreted, appraised and disseminated in China and in the West.

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15. The fact that a work deemed to be canonical, as is *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature* (Mostow, 2003), should not include a single reference to the work is a clear example.

16. These aspects can not be looked at in further depth here due to a lack of space. Readers can garner a basic idea of this question by looking back at the arguments put forward by Hutters (1982) and Egan (1998). For analysis of the existential scope of the work, see Xie (1990).





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